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# Patty Hearst: an Actress Identifying With a Part?

BY ROBERT COHEN

The trial of Patricia Hearst, with its kinky combination of radicalism, sex, terrorism, media hype, antiestablishmentarianism and a flamboyant cast of characters, happens additionally to raise one of the most intriguing and perplexing questions ever brought to the bar of justice: Whether a purported criminal act is essentially physical or mental.

For while popular wisdom tends mindlessly to affirm the famous Frank Loesser lyric, "You can't go to jail for what you're thinking," it is precisely this—what Miss Hearst may or may not have been thinking—that the jury is being asked to determine, for what she was thinking is inextricably linked to the deeds she is charged with having committed.

The physical events seem to be generally uncontested. Miss Hearst was abducted and held for a time in a closet; she subsequently participated in a bank robbery; she engaged in sexual relations with some of her abductors; she failed to take advantage of seemingly safe opportunities to escape—these factors are not being argued.

What is in question is what she was or was not thinking when these events took place. Was she "in love" with a captor, William Wolfe? Did she "willingly" join the SLA? Did she really think the FBI would shoot her on sight?

These are the questions which the jury is being asked to resolve beyond a reasonable doubt. Whether Miss Hearst goes to jail, therefore, will depend almost entirely on what the jury *thinks* she was thinking. Given what we know about the human mind, this is a very uncomfortable prospect.

How, for example, are we to deal with the possibility of emotional ambivalence? How can we deal, in a court of justice where the scales have but two pans, with the possibility that Miss Hearst had ambivalent rather than absolute feelings about Wolfe, the SLA, the FBI and her parents? Ambivalence about such matters would hardly be unprecedented even among unabdicated adolescents; in Miss Hearst's case, it may be central to the drama.

One of the ironies of the trial is that Miss Hearst is accused, as it were, of having fallen in love with SLA member Wolfe, a charge which she hotly denies, but which surviving SLA "sister" Emily Harris supports. If Miss Hearst was truly "in love," the prosecution implies, she was a willing participant and therefore a guilty one; if she only pretended to "love" Wolfe out of fear for her safety, the defense counters, she was actually an unwilling participant and therefore innocent.

But who can tell the truth here? How would Emily Harris know what was truly in Miss Hearst's mind? Would Miss Hearst her-

self even know for sure? How quantifiable is the feeling of love, or the feeling of past love? How absolute?

If questioned about our own past intimacies, we assess them in the light of whatever elements of enticement, seduction, duress, anxiety and reward may have accompanied them. How absolute can we be about whether or not they represented "true love"? Nor is it entirely irrelevant who asks such questions of us.

Given the enormous gravity and complexity of Miss Hearst's situation, both at the time of her abduction and now that she is being tried, the notion that she can give an unequivocal and unambivalent assessment of her true feelings for the dead William Wolfe seems beyond all reason.

The principle of cognitive dissonance could explain much of Miss Hearst's behavior during the past two years, but it seems to have no place on the courtroom agenda. Amply studied and defined over the past dozen or so years, cognitive dissonance means, quite simply, that people in ambivalent situations often come to believe in what they find themselves doing.

These studies prove what common wisdom has always known: that actors tend to identify with the parts they play, debaters with the

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positions they are assigned and attorneys with the claims they are hired to advocate.

Guilt plays a part in this process; a woman who finds herself performing sexual acts with a relative stranger will have a tendency to "justify" those acts to herself by convincing herself that she is in "love" with the man, even though the act was initiated under duress. Similarly, a man who finds himself shouting political slogans will tend to justify that action by coming to believe in the slogans, or believing that he believes in the slogans, even though his shouting was initiated by a hiring agency.

We all may like to think that cognitive dissonance does not apply to us; science reminds us, quite impersonally, that it does. Although the principle may turn out not to be involved in the Hearst case, the chances are very high that it is, and the format of a trial, in any event, affords little room for its proper analysis.

Cognitive dissonance is only one of a series of processes that invariably work to alter our feelings—and our later feelings about those feelings. The defense claim that Miss Hearst was "brainwashed" is patently foolish insofar as we think of brainwashing as a metaphysical restructuring of the mind. It is beyond dis-

pute, however, that Miss Hearst was subjected to persuasion, inducement, seduction, disorientation and the threat of physical harm. These techniques have great power, resting as they do on mechanisms far beneath the rational workings of consciousness.

The instinct for survival, after all, has given us during the past 100,000 years or so innumerable autonomic responses of compliance: The student nods silent agreement with the arrogant professor, the POW smiles benignly at the prison guard, the rape victim obliges in her indignity. It is absurd to assume that these outward forms of behavior carry no internal ramifications to help make a person's plight more bearable.

In Miss Hearst's situation, all the rewards would come from compliance, and all the punishments from noncompliance or neutrality. If it is clear that Miss Hearst's initial compliance was externally coerced, it is also clear that the pirate-like life-style of the SLA, with its brilliant women and daring young men, could eventually exercise a seductive effect on a rich and sheltered young woman.

It would have been extraordinary if the SLA could not have shifted, over the course of Miss Hearst's incarceration, from coercive to seductive control. Control, nevertheless, it remained; whether or not Miss Hearst considered herself willing or unwilling is really not the issue. Miss Hearst's feelings—and her recollection of those feelings—are important but not conclusive. If she felt at the time that she joined the SLA willingly, that may only mean the SLA did a better job on her than we have given it credit for.

The jurors, then, will be asked to find answers that do not exist to questions that are irrelevant. How possibly can they make a judgment? There is only one course open to them: Since they cannot know Miss Hearst's innermost feelings then or now (any more than she can), they will project their own imagined ones.

This is a tricky business, for the jurors may wind up deciding the case on the basis of what each of them considers to be socially approvable conduct.

If they can imagine themselves, at 19, doing pretty much what Miss Hearst did, they will find her innocent. But if the very idea of committing such acts fills them with embarrassment or even shame, they will find her guilty. So, in a sense, when the jurors retire to deliberate, they will be judging not only the defendant but also themselves and their imagined actions.

And, insofar as we, the American public, have made ourselves a larger jury in this case—and have imagined, too, what we would have done in Miss Hearst's situation—we will be judging ourselves as we follow the case down to its most minuscule detail.